

Lessons from Birth

Besides the Columbus quincentenary, 1992 marks 200 years since William Carey spawned modern Protestant missions.

This is the year to celebrate William Carey and the birth of the modern Protestant missionary movement 200 years ago.

Some trace the beginnings of Protestant global missions to John Calvin's brave but failed attempt to send an evangelical mission to Brazil in 1555. Others point to the chaplains of the Dutch East India Company in Indonesia in the early 1600s, the first Lutherans sent to India in 1706 or the Moravians in the West Indies in 1732.

But for worldwide enduring missionary impact, no rapid sequence of events in the history of Protestant missions can match what was accomplished between May 1792 and June 1793 by a 31-year-old, part-time shoemaker, part-time schoolteacher and part-time Baptist preacher who had recently flunked his ordination exams.

William Carey is generally credited with launching what became the modern Protestant missionary movement in 1792.

In that one year, four momentous incidents involving William Carey changed the history of missions: 1) the publication of a book; 2) the preaching of a sermon; 3) the organization of a society; and 4) the sending of a missionary.

William Carey was the central character in all four incidents, and each has a missionary lesson for today.

By Samuel Hugh Moffett



William Carey: the "Father" of modern Protestant missions

Photo courtesy of U.S. Center for World Mission

The book

1792 marked publication of Carey's 87-page *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. In his book,

Carey tried to answer the common misapprehension in Protestantism of his day that the Great Commission of Jesus

Christ had already been accomplished by the church and that the whole world had been reached.

But Carey's open Bible, next to a leather globe of the world placed near his cobbler's bench, told him differently. According to his calculations from Scripture and geography, more than three-fourths of the world's population was still unreached by the Gospel.

That was the first missionary lesson from 1792: Get the facts right about mission.

The sermon

Soon after his book was published, Carey stood to preach at a meeting of the Baptist Ministers' Association. His message showed it's not enough to convince the mind with facts and statistics, but challenge to mission must reach the heart.

As his text, Carey took Isaiah 54:2-3. And his sermon had two points. The first was faith: "Expect great things from God." And the second was works: "Attempt great things for

God." Faith and works make an important combination.

In other words, the missionary must believe in God's great purpose for the world and be ready to do something



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The October 1792 formation of the Baptist Missionary Society is cited as the start of the modern Protestant missionary movement.

about it. The second missionary lesson from 1792: To the right facts, add the right motives.

The mission society

The organizing of a missionary society four months later put the muscle, the necessary structural fiber, into the mission. The October 1792 formation of the Baptist Missionary Society is generally cited as the start of the modern Protestant missionary movement.

This calls to mind the practical injunction of a more recent missionary statesman, John R. Mott: “Pray as if everything depended on prayer; organize as if everything depended on organization.”

A third lesson for today from 1792: To the facts and motives, add the right kind of organization.

The missionary

Carey’s vision for missions was just on paper, a theory, until June 1793 when he sailed as a missionary to India, rather than stay in England as president of the missionary society. Only then did it all come to life. Only then did Carey give Protestantism its modern model of a missionary.

Carey did not even wait until reaching India to begin his work. All the way on board ship he studied Bengali and began to translate Genesis into that language.

In 1805 Carey and his colleagues drew up what they called the Serampore Form of Agreement to guide them in their missionary methods. Here is a sampling, paraphrased.

1. The human soul is of inestimable value and is in mortal danger of eternal punishment. But Christ can save.

2. We must gain all the knowledge we can of the Indian mind and the Indian religions.

3. We must not offend Indian sensibilities by vaunting our English ways and attacking theirs.

4. We must “watch [for] all opportunities of doing good”—preaching, itinerating, talking to all who will listen.

5. The “great subject of our preaching” must be “Christ the Crucified.”

6. We must do everything necessary

to win the confidence of the people.

7. We must remember the importance of native leaders and building up the Christian lives of converts. We must value the work of female colleagues in their important work with women.

8. In all possible ways, we must promote the development of Indian leadership and the formation of Indian churches led by Indian pastors.

9. We must “labor with all our might in forwarding translations of the sacred scriptures in the languages of Hindustan.”

10. To be fit for these “unutterably important labors,” we must be “instant in prayer and the cultivation of personal religion.”

These principles have obvious applications for mission today, whether in India, Latin America or anywhere in the world.

Humble hero

Carey died in 1834. He had translated the Scriptures into 35 languages and dialects. He had founded a college, which still grants the degrees for most of the Protestant schools of Christian higher education in India. And he was honored by some of the most prestigious academic societies of England.

But at Carey’s request, the only words inscribed on his tombstone, other than his name and dates, were:

“A wretched, poor and helpless worm,

On Thy kind arms I fall.”

“Stop talking about Dr. Carey—it’s Christ you must remember,” he told his friends at the end. ■



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